

A Baptism of Words

Reading as empowerment



Dolores Kendrick

When I was a child, part of our extended family was a neighbor whose name was Milton Piper. He was of the Piper family, a sturdy, closely-knitted clan who were the vortex of U Street families in Washington's LeDroit Park. Though he did not know it at the time, Piper (his surname gave him a finer distinction than his first) had a powerful effect upon me because every time he visited our home he brought an astounding gift to me and my brother and sister: he told us stories.

We would sit at his feet on the linoleum floor (he always chose a comfortable chair, like some wizard out of the stars), our eyes agape, our bodies stilled, our imaginations feasting upon the various tales and wonders Piper would offer us from books or films or his own portfolio of histories we knew so little of. He was our literary griot, and we often waited anxiously for Piper's weekly visit and a continuation of Scene I or Chapter 2. I particularly remember his retelling of *Sullivan's Travels*, a film about a director who decided against the lush life of Hollywood to find his destiny among common, ordinary people. He began his odyssey by traveling freight trains.

Piper's storytelling was in the era of the Imagination, when one's curiosity and fantasies made holy vows to each other and one received the endowment and empowerment of one's personhood uncontaminated by the age of technology that was soon to come. From this I learned that reading was the natural heir to listening and seeing with one's mind. I learned that intelligence, *true intelligence*, counted upon my being able to absorb the word, make a friend of it in my still unannounced youth, wrestling into the future.

The diseases that have overcome our state of being in the modern world through the misuse of technology are myriad, but one of them is the crippling of the intellectual growth that reading affords. As things go, reading has been replaced by the spoken word, when indeed it should be the bounty of it. In a sense reading has become a second language.

In one of my poems in *The Women of Plums: Poems in the Voices of Slave Women* (William Morrow, 1989), Sophie, a house slave woman, learns to read and write through listening to her mistress and

master spell out words while they are conversing so that Sophie won't know what they're saying. Slaves were not allowed to learn to read and write because slave owners feared that such education would emancipate the slaves from the plantation by giving them a sense of empowerment. Slaves often risked the severance of their hands and fingers by devising subtle and sundry ways of pursuing that education. Sophie is hungry for the enlightenment of reading, for she knows that this will rescue her from the doom of illiteracy. So she puts to memory the slave owners' conversations and spells out the words to her uncle (an educated free man), who instructs her as she spells. Through this she learns to read and write.

A youngster who learns to read at an early age, whether through sound or sight or through a "Piper" story or through an engaging parent or teacher, will ultimately discover the world of excitement and mystery and imagination that reading generates. That youngster might easily move, with immense curiosity, from the known to the unknown with all its mystery and possibilities, journeys and promise. Such a young person will own the magic and tools of reading, from T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* to Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* to Langston Hughes' "Theme for English B" to the Native American masterpiece *Black Elk Speaks* to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. With such options young people can defy the elements of servitude, empower themselves, thrust themselves from an imprisoned imagination to a spiritual and intellectual focus that in many ways nourishes a complete education.

The journey, then, is to move beyond the shallow shadows of ignorance and oblivion, as does Sophie, who finally owns her Self as she challenges the darkness of ignorance and celebrates what she finds:

Wants to know the baptism of words ■

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Dolores Kendrick, poet laureate of the District of Columbia, has received numerous honors, including a National Endowment for the Arts Award and a special Fulbright Award for Accomplishments in Education and Literature. She was the first Vira I. Heinz Professor Emerita at Phillips Exeter Academy. Her most recent work is *Why the Woman Is Singing on the Corner* (Peter Randall Publisher, 2002).